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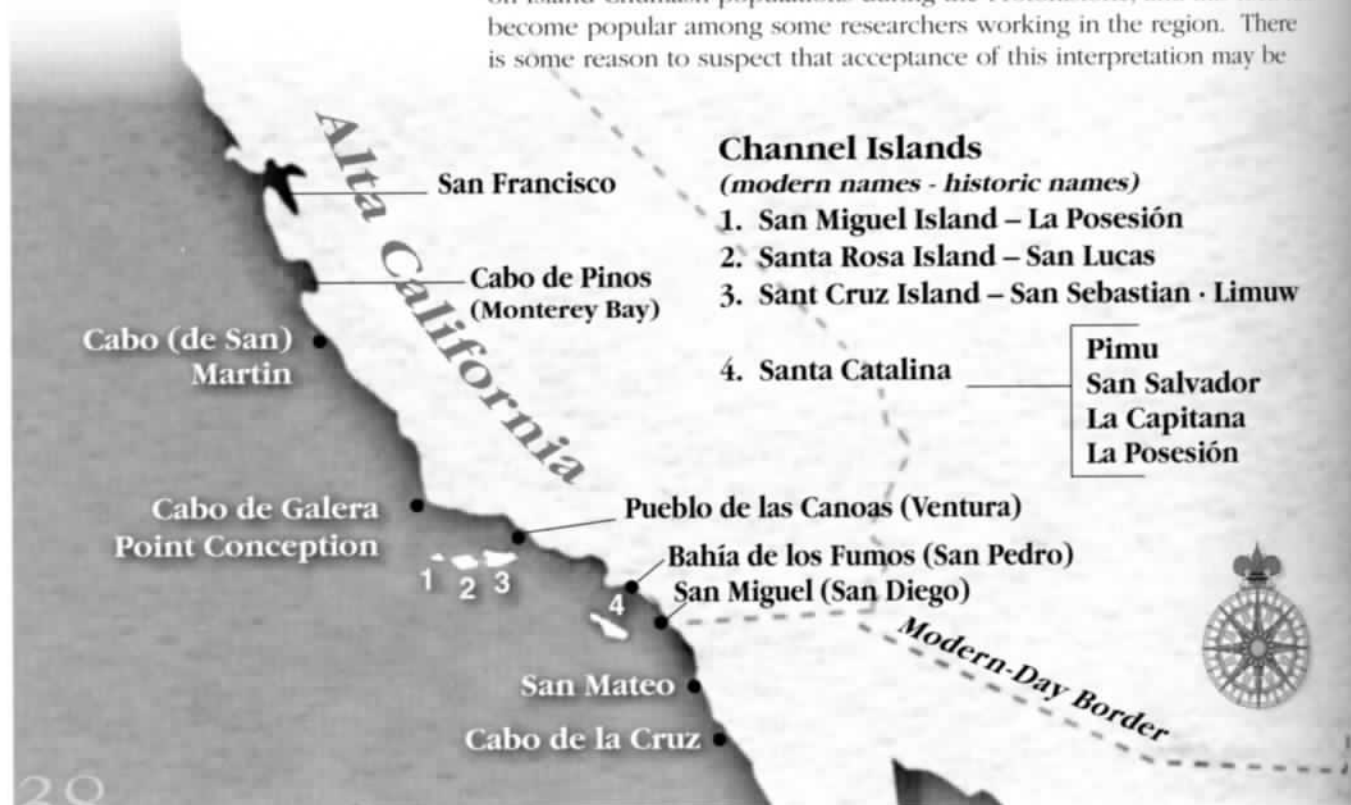
The Earliest European Contacts with the Chumash Islanders¹

by John R. Johnson, Ph.D.



Introduction

The end of continuous Chumash occupation of the Northern Channel Islands came almost three centuries following their first contact with Europeans. Anthropologists and historians refer to the portion of this era prior to the establishment of the first missions in Alta California as the "Protohistoric," encompassing the years between 1542 and 1768. The most extensive written records pertaining to this period derive from the voyages led by Cabrillo (1542-1543) and Vizcaíno (1602-1603), and there appears to have been virtually no contact after these voyages took place. Because so few direct descriptions by Europeans pertain to this period, the answers to questions regarding how Chumash life may have been affected by these early contacts must derive from the discipline of archaeology. Some archaeologists have proposed that European diseases may have taken a toll on Island Chumash populations during the Protohistoric, and this idea has become popular among some researchers working in the region. There is some reason to suspect that acceptance of this interpretation may be



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premature, so this review has been written to examine the extant evidence and critically evaluate the data that has been offered in support of the Protohistoric Pandemic Hypothesis.

Cabrillo's Voyage

The earliest European encounter with the native inhabitants of the Channel Islands took place during the Spanish exploration of the California coast by Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo in 1542-1543. In sailing northward from San Diego Bay, Cabrillo visited Santa Catalina and San Clemente islands, which he named for two of his ships, *San Salvador* and *Victoria*. He then crossed back to the mainland, moving up the coast to a large Ventureño Chumash ranchería that was named "Pueblo de las Canoas" because of the many plank canoes seen there. This ranchería was probably the large coastal town of *Muuu* at Mugu Lagoon, although both *Humaliwo* (Malibu) and *Sbisbolop* (Ventura) have been suggested as alternative locations. Cabrillo then crossed over to the Northern Channel Islands on 13 October 1542 for the Spaniards' first encounter with the Chumash islanders. As the historian Harry Kelsey has noted:

The main narrative of the expedition is almost hopelessly confusing and repetitious at this point, having been derived from several sources, each account somewhat different than the other. The seeming contradictions are probably due to the fact that the various islands and the towns on the mainland were visited on different days by various vessels in the expedition. As a result, what purports to be a list of village names in the narrative for 15 October is really a composite of several lists, with a good deal of repetition. The same holds true for a second list of that date, as well as the list dated 1 November, one following comments made for 3 January 1543, and one dated 12 January. For more than a century historians have disputed the exact locations of these places [Kelsey 1986:147-148].

The original logs kept by members of Cabrillo's expedition have been lost to posterity; however, a composite account copied from at least five different journals was prepared by Fr. Andrés de Urdaneta under orders of the viceroy following the return of the ships to the port of Navidad on the west coast of Mexico. Lacking familiarity with California geography, Urdaneta managed to confuse the various lists of Chumash and

Gabrielino placenames recorded by various chroniclers (Kelsey 1986:169-170). For example, the Chumash name *Limu* (Santa Cruz Island) appears to have been confounded with the Gabrielino (Tongva) name *Pimu* (Santa Catalina Island). As Kroeber pointed out, two separate lists of village names are given for *Limu*, one of which likely refers to rancherías on Santa Catalina Island (Kroeber 1925:555). Careful textual analysis of the original Urdaneta manuscript (Kelsey 1986:169-170) and J. P. Harrington's linguistic analysis of rancherías named in the narrative (Harrington 1924; King 1975) have cleared up some of the confusion surrounding the sequence of the expedition's movements along the Santa Barbara Channel (Kelsey 1986:147-153).

Cabrillo returned to the Channel Islands towards the end of November after a brief exploration of the California coast north. He appears to have stopped at Cuyler Harbor, San Miguel Island to repair the ship's launch. The traditional assessment of most historians and anthropologists has been that the entire expedition then wintered at this spot; however, Harry Kelsey, author of the most definitive biography of Cabrillo, has argued convincingly that Santa Catalina Island was actually the place where the expedition appears to have made their stopover until mid-January. During this period, Cabrillo fell and suffered broken limb bones during a fight with the island's inhabitants, eventually dying from his injuries. Testimony later recorded from two of Cabrillo's men stated that the island where he was buried was *La Capitana*, thus connecting it with

Cuyler Harbor, San Miguel Island

Photo by Robert Schwemmer,
Maritime Heritage Program,
West Coast Regional Coordinator,
NOAA



Santa Catalina; because that island had been named *San Salvador* after his *Capitana* (flagship) (Kelsey 1986:157-159; Pourade 1962:22; Wagner 1929:72). The debate as to where Cabrillo died and was buried has been further complicated by the discovery of a lichen-covered slab of sandstone collected in 1901 near Skunk Point on Santa Rosa Island. When this artifact was cleaned in the 1950s, it was noted to contain an inscribed cross and the initials "JR," as well as an incised anthropomorphic petroglyph presumably added by the native islanders. Because Cabrillo was known as Juan Rodríguez by his contemporaries, the initials "JR" suggested to some that this artifact may have been his gravestone (Heizer 1972). If it is, then it had likely been carried from his original gravesite on either Santa Catalina or San Miguel islands.

After Cabrillo's death and burial, the expedition resumed its voyage of exploration, reaching northern California by the end of February before returning to the Santa Barbara Channel region. While stopping at San Miguel Island, two youths were taken on board to be brought back to Mexico and trained as interpreters in case a return voyage was contemplated. The expedition arrived back at the port of Navidad on 14 April 1543, nine months after embarkation (Kelsey 1986:161).

Protohistoric Contacts after Cabrillo

Some have speculated that Francis Drake may have had contact with Chumash islanders in 1579, and it is certain that the Channel Islands were sometimes sighted by Manila Galleons passing by during their return from the Philippines to ports on the west coast of Mexico (Johnson 1982:16-18; Wagner 1929:114-117, 1937:411, 447). Despite the potential for there to have been sixteenth-century encounters with Europeans after Cabrillo, there is no documentation for any actual contacts until 1595. Following the loss of his ship in a storm at Drake's Bay, Sebastián Rodríguez Cermeño and his crew traveled southward along the California coast in the ship's launch. The Spaniards spent three days passing by the Northern Channel Islands and traded with some Chumash fishermen for fishes and a small seal while anchored off of the southeast side of Santa Rosa Island (Wagner 1929:162).

Following Cabrillo's voyage, the most extensive record of Protohistoric contact with Chumash islanders comes from Sebastián Vizcaíno's visit in December 1602. After spending the last four days of November on Santa Catalina Island, Vizcaíno's two ships entered the Santa Barbara Channel (named by him on St. Barbara's Day, December 4), where they made contact with the native inhabitants of Santa Cruz Island who came out to meet the Spaniards in their plank canoes. Two principal diaries document these encounters, one by Vizcaíno and the other by the missionary Fr. Antonio de Ascensión (Bolton 1963:83-90; Wagner 1929:235-239). A rough sketch map of the Channel Islands resulted from the voyage. This map refers to Santa Cruz Island as *isla de gente barbada*, documenting that it was the custom of at least some Chumash men not to remove their facial hair (Hayes 2007:20; Mathes 1968:93; Wagner 1929:238).

The journals kept during Vizcaíno's visit indicate that perhaps only six days were spent around the Northern Channel Islands, and contact with Island Chumash was relatively limited because heavy seas prevented the ships from approaching too close to shore. It is evident that trading took place, and it is interesting that the Santa Cruz islanders had received advance word from the Gabrielino inhabitants of Santa Catalina Island that Spaniards were on their way before the latter arrived. Fr. Ascensión's



This inscribed stone was found on Santa Rosa Island in 1901 and has been the object of much speculation and research regarding its authenticity as a grave-marker for Juan Rodríguez Cabrillo.



The map of the Channel Islands show locations of Island Chumash towns that existed during the Mission Period. A number of these appear to have been occupied during the time of Cabrillo's visit in 1542-1543 and throughout the Protohistoric Period.

Courtesy of the Author

diary records that the Spaniards were surprised to discover that fragments of China silk were in possession of the Island Gabrielino residents of Isthmus Cove. The Spaniards surmised that these came from a shipwreck, but had to depart before they could be shown its location. Rather than coming from a wreck, these pieces of silk most likely came from trade with Cermeño's crew eight years earlier, as A. K. Brown has suggested (2001:16). The alternative possibility that the silk came from a galleon wreck seemed plausible thirty years ago, when a putative sixteenth-century galleon wreck was reported in deep water off of Santa Catalina Island (Johnson 1982:20-21; Walker and Hudson 1993:21); however, this find has not been substantiated archaeologically nor has alleged documentary evidence been produced.

Although the Channel Islands were sometimes seen from a distance, no further direct contacts between Chumash islanders and Europeans appear to have taken place for the next 166 years after Vizcaino's exploration. The only brief sightings that have been documented were those by a Spanish exploring expedition which found itself between two of the islands at dawn in 1606, and a French merchant ship that described what appears to have been San Nicolas Island in 1709 (Brown 2001:24-26). In neither case, does there appear to have been interaction with island inhabitants. Some have suggested that the Manila galleons would have been major sources of contagions introduced to California Indian populations, which then could have spread to Chumash peoples (e.g., Erlandson et al. 2001:14-15; Walker and Hudson 1993:21); however, it is the considered opinion of most historians who have reflected upon the question that contacts with any indigenous groups were few and far between. Although Manila galleons continued to make an annual east-to-west crossing of the Pacific Ocean north of the equator, they appear largely to have avoided direct landfalls on the California coast, heading south to Acapulco once signs of the mainland were observed. The Spaniards believed that contact with cold winds in the northern latitudes invited scurvy, so ships were instructed to avoid sailing north of 36° or 37° North Latitude (Brown 2001:24-25, 28-29; Wagner 1937:94, 114, 139).

Impacts of Protohistoric Contacts

From the foregoing review of known protohistoric encounters with Europeans, it would seem that impacts on indigenous island societies were slight, resulting only in exchanges of native foods for objects of European manufacture. One historian has suggested that Vizcaíno's descriptions of "white or blond" youths on Santa Catalina Island implies that Cabrillo's men had contributed a genetic component to the native population when they wintered on the island sixty years earlier (Kelsey 1985:497). Beyond a few trade goods and perhaps some miscegenation, the most popular hypothesis pertaining to protohistoric impacts is that disease epidemics followed early Spanish contacts and led to a dramatic demographic decline on the Channel Islands. In particular, this possibility has been championed by Erlandson and colleagues (Erlandson and Bartoy 1995, 1996; Erlandson et al. 2001). It has even been suggested that reconstructions of California Indian societies based on late eighteenth and early nineteenth century ethnohistoric documents are inherently flawed because protohistoric pandemics had drastically reduced populations in the centuries preceding the first Spanish land expedition in 1769 (Preston 1996, 2002). Because the protohistoric pandemic hypothesis has gained a certain degree of acceptance among archaeologists working in California, it is worthwhile critically examining the evidence offered in its support.

The most thorough review and analysis of contacts between European seafarers and California Indians during the Protohistoric Period is by Lightfoot and Simmons (1998). These authors consider five maritime expeditions that interacted with native peoples on the California Coast, three of which (Cabrillo, Cermeño, and Vizcaíno) visited the Channel Islands. They point out that given the relatively small size of the Spanish crews, diseases such as influenza, smallpox, and measles would have already exceeded their incubation periods, having worked their way through the available onboard human carriers long before the ships had reached Alta California from ports in Mexico. The most likely source for disease transmission would have been from venereal diseases carried by crew members who may have had sexual contact with native women. Cabrillo's men especially were present among the Channel Islands long enough for such relations to occur. Although some bioarchaeological evidence of venereal syphilis exists from a cemetery on Santa Rosa Island (CA-SRI-2B), it is unclear whether the two individuals with indications of this disease date to the Protohistoric Period or to the subsequent Mission Period when syphilis was known to have been more prevalent (Rick 2004:273-274, 2007:249; Walker et al. 2002:297-299). To date, no other Chumash burials have been identified with clear evidence of venereal disease, which casts some doubt on the hypothesis that syphilis had a major impact on native populations prior to the Mission Period.

The authors who propose that protohistoric pandemics decimated island populations rely primarily upon numbers of radiocarbon-dated components of excavated archaeological sites in their analysis. Based on a sample of 215 calibrated radiocarbon dates distributed in 100-year intervals, these authors note that there is a marked decline in the number of dated components following Cabrillo's visit in 1542 (Erlandson et al. 2001). Although the authors admit that their sample may not be representative, they fail to mention what is perhaps a major source of bias in their results. Most archaeologists tend to conserve funds by dating only those occupation layers for which there are no obvious time-sensitive artifacts.

This is especially true when glass trade beads or other objects of European manufacture are present, but it is also the case for distinctive Olivella bead types dating to the Protohistoric and Mission periods. As a result, it is unlikely that an index based on radiocarbon-dated components would accurately represent the number of excavated components dating to the most recent periods of site occupations.

Conclusion

In view of the extant evidence, it is clear that demographic impacts on Island Chumash populations during the Protohistoric Period have not been demonstrated. Even if epidemics followed the visits of Cabrillo or Vizcaino, populations have a tendency to rebound, as has been demonstrated in epidemiological studies among indigenous South American groups (Black 1975:517). Although the likelihood of major demographic impacts from diseases spread by early voyages has been questioned, analysis of mission burial records for the Chumash region does indicate that occasional disease epidemics would spread northward from colonized portions of Mexico prior to the actual settlement of Baja California. For example, a measles epidemic appears to have spread northward from Baja California at the very end of the Protohistoric Period. A "notch" in the Chumash population pyramid, as reconstructed from mission records, indicates that the age cohort born in the decade of the 1760s had fewer than expected survivors. The fact that the population pyramid was otherwise what would be expected from an indigenous population and that there had been population recovery after this measles epidemic argues against the hypothesis that there were long lasting demographic impacts to Chumash populations prior to the Mission Period (Johnson 2000; Walker and Johnson 1994).

Notes

1. This article, slightly revised, comprises a portion of Chapter 3, "Chumash Islanders at European Contact" by John R. Johnson in *Channel Islands National Park Archaeological Overview and Assessment*, edited by Michael A. Glassow, report submitted to Channel Islands National Park, Ventura. It is reproduced here with permission of Ann Huston, Chief of Cultural Resources, Channel Islands National Park.

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